

Chapman University Chapman University Digital Commons

History Faculty Articles and Research

History

1996

Review of Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky, His Life and Legacy.

Robert A. Slayton

Chapman University, slayton@chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/history_articles

Recommended Citation

Slayton, Robert A. "Let Them Call Me Rebel." Rev. of Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky, His Life and Legacy. *H-URBAN@uicvm.uic.edu*. 1996. Web.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Articles and Research by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.

Review of Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky, His Life and Legacy.

Comments

This article was originally published in [H-Net Reviews](#) in 1996.

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).

Copyright

H-Net

Review of Sanford Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel: The Life and Legacy of Saul Alinsky*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989. xvi + 595 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 0-394-57243-2. \$29.95 [Paperback: Random House, 1992. ISBN 0-679-73418-X. \$15.00.

by

Robert Slayton, Chapman College, slayton@nexus.chapman.edu

[Bob will be away from the end of May throughout the summer, so comments should be sent to Comm-Org and will be compiled for his return.]

Heather Booth once said that "Alinsky is to community organizing as Freud is to analysis." The analogy fits in many ways. Saul Alinsky was no god-like figure whose rules must be followed slavishly; he made mistakes, and his work has been refined enormously. In addition, other groups had been doing organizing long before he came on the scene; even after he emerged, some of them, like those of the Civil Rights movement, would wage immensely successful campaigns without his help.

Alinsky's great contribution was the codification of community organizing. He was the first to call attention to this work as a distinct program, with a life and literature of its own, separate from any particular cause such as the union movement or Populism. He wrote about it, philosophized about it, and provided the first set of rules. But most important, he gave it a unique identity, and he made clear that community organizing was here to stay, a profession in its own right. As Sanford Horwitt puts it, "Alinsky more than anybody deserves credit for demonstrating that community organizing could be a lifelong career..." (p. 544).

Horwitt provides the most detailed and insightful biography so far written on Alinsky--a monumental task, as will be described below--and the book will likely remain the standard work on this figure. In addition, he continually places Alinsky within the context of his times, providing useful and relevant historical background, in the style, for example, of Taylor Branch's *Parting the Waters* (1988).

Horwitt tells how Alinsky, notwithstanding his later attacks on academics, honed his interests and his skills at the University of Chicago Sociology Department, working under the auspices of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess. These leaders taught him to look at the larger picture, the "social ecology" of an urban area, rather than to focus on a particular problem, such as juvenile delinquency, in isolation. Horwitt notes, however, the same critique that Alinsky would offer of these theories: namely, that they never challenged or criticized the larger economic and social forces that shape communities. Ironically, the same charge would be aimed at Alinsky's work as well.

But the university was in the city, and the city was Chicago, and that gave Alinsky an opportunity to explore. In many ways the glory of the University of Chicago Sociology Department was that it wanted to get out, wanted to see first hand how the city functioned, before its members crafted their theories.

Alinsky took this to the farthest reaches, setting a lifelong pattern of stretching the limits. Given an assignment to investigate juvenile delinquency and crime, he worked his way up through the mob, becoming a confidante of the Al Capone gang, hanging around with such underworld luminaries as Frank Nitti and Roger Touhy.

Alinsky began his professional career, therefore, as a criminologist; Horwitt notes that, at this stage, Alinsky was not only in the classic academic mode of research and presentation; he was also fairly apolitical: "during his undergraduate days, Alinsky had shared in the general lack of politics at the University of Chicago and was never part of the small minority of students who participated in organized political activities" (p. 37).

Several things changed this--above all, the Great Depression. Even those who were employed at middle-class wages, like Alinsky, had to see the extent of suffering that was sweeping the country. Anyone with a sense of justice, with a sense of compassion, had to feel a fire in the breast, had to consider action.

And one model of such action, etched bold on the national landscape by 1936, was the union movement. When John L. Lewis founded the CIO, he let loose a formidable force of organized labor, bound by none of the polite rules of the AFL. Alinsky watched and took mental notes. Though he never openly acknowledged that this was one of his great training grounds, his closeness to various labor leaders--including Lewis himself, Herb March, and later Ralph Helstein of the Packinghouse Workers--as well as the similarity of organizing styles, indicates the depth of the CIO's influence on Alinsky.

At the same time, he was becoming disillusioned with his profession. Criminologists studying juvenile delinquency at this time focused on personal deviancy, emphasizing treatment of the individual. Alinsky, following the ideas of Clifford Shaw, who was then employing him in the pioneering Chicago Areas Project, emphasized the "social milieu," the set of conditions that caused delinquency, especially poverty. In addition, the Areas Project was experimenting with the idea of setting up local councils--with area people, rather than outside professionals--to run their own social services.

This all came together when Alinsky was sent to the packinghouse district. For Saul this was glorious, romantic and exciting: the scene of Upton Sinclair's [The Jungle](#) (1906) and of a critical CIO organizing drive. There he met Joseph Meegan, a park supervisor, and in 1939 they founded the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC), the oldest local community organization in America still in existence today.

In founding the BYNC Alinsky and Meegan made two huge jumps from the work of their predecessors in poor urban areas, most notably the settlement houses. First and most important, they made it clear that community organizations had to be based on local democracy rather than on outside authority. Organizers would facilitate, but local people had to lead and participate. If the organizers had special skills, they were to be used to train residents to control "their own destiny," in the words of the Council's motto, rather than to impose an allegedly superior knowledge and vision. By so doing, community residents would be empowered, not only gaining new resources, but new confidence as well. One observer noted, "That was some of Saul's real

genius, his sense of timing and understanding how others would perceive something. Saul knew that if I grab you by the shoulders and say do this, do that and the other, you're going to resent it. If you make the discovery yourself, you're going to strut because _you_ made it" (p. 109).

In addition, Alinsky and Meegan were not afraid, in fact were committed to taking on economic issues, unlike the settlement houses. From the beginning, they saw the union as a critical part of their efforts, saw it as a force that would help end problems by raising the living standards of the community. Settlement house workers, on the other hand (with notable exceptions such as Jane Addams), often balked at the idea of supporting union efforts, of joining a picket line.

The initial vision of the Back of the Yards Council, of local democracy, was the basis of all of Alinsky's later work and must be examined in more detail here.

Above all, Alinsky always separated the goals of democracy and empowerment, and never confused them. He recognized that they were both important and understood how they were intimately linked, but he always maintained that they were not the same things.

For Alinsky, democracy meant the participation of all human beings in deciding the rules and conditions of their lives. Even if power did not flow, if the movement did not succeed, this had to come first. Horwitt emphasizes that "the _process_ of problem-solving, the active participation of ordinary people, was at least as important as the solutions or decisions themselves" (p. 105).

A lot of this had to do with the context of the times. Throughout the Western world totalitarianism was triumphing. Within a year or two after the Back of the Yards Council was founded, there was the very real possibility (some would have said probability), that England would be invaded, and that the United States would be the last representative democracy left among the Western nations. Intellectuals were asking openly if democracy could survive, and Alinsky had to feel that maintaining it was one of the greatest services he could do for humanity. He never lost that vision. In the statement of purpose of the Industrial Areas Foundation, Alinsky wrote, "In our modern urban civilization, multitudes of our people have been condemned to urban anonymity--to living the kind of life where many of them neither know nor care for their neighbors. This course of urban anonymity...is one of eroding destruction to the foundations of democracy. For although we profess that we are citizens of a democracy, and although we may vote once every four years, millions of our people feel deep down in their heart of hearts that there is no place for them--that they do not 'count'" (p. 105).

In the long run, these words and plans became a model to draw on; in the 1940s, however, Alinsky provided faith in democracy at a difficult time. The reporter Robert Shayon, touring Back of the Yards, said, "I lit up like an electric tree because...I saw a vision of hope, of democracy solving its own problems."

The Back of the Yards Council represented other pioneering moves as well: unlike the Areas Project, which had focused on homogeneous neighborhoods, Back of the Yards operated in a killing ground of ethnic rivalries and hatreds. Alinsky recognized this, and started to tackle issues of organizing that would decades later be honed to a fine edge in racial situations such as Woodlawn and Rochester. It also established the standard Alinsky model: the basic components

of community organizations were organizations, not individuals. This meant putting the local organized landscape to the service of larger goals while providing a degree of familiarity and comfort to members.

Alinsky took this knowledge, and then did what no one had ever done before: he wrote a book laying it all down, putting the community organizer, not the cause, at the center of the debate. *Reveille for Radicals*, published in 1945, was, and remains, a bombshell of a book (at least according to my students). It places community organizers in a long American tradition, starting with a quotation from Thomas Paine, arguing that they have always been people who fought for and transformed democracy. He then provided a set of case studies (all drawn from his--at that time very limited--experience; he changed the names of the two or three organizations he had worked with repeatedly, to make it look like there was a huge national movement), filled with details of how to make this new system work.

In setting up the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), Alinsky also created the first organization that would provide legs to community organizing; along with his books, this remains his enduring legacy. Above all, he recruited and trained organizers, much as the IAF does today. The roll call of his proteges reads like a hall of fame of the community organizing movement: Fred Ross (who in turn recruited Cesar Chavez), Ed Chambers, Lester Hunt, Bob Squires, Nicholas von Hoffman, and Thomas Gaudette (who recruited Gale Cincotta).

Horwitt then takes the reader through Alinsky's great struggles, most notably the Woodlawn neighborhood in Chicago, and Rochester. There he explains the qualities that Alinsky brought as an organizer, the elements of his style, and thus the lessons he taught to his own and future generations.

First, Alinsky was incredibly flexible. What Horwitt describes as Alinsky's "brilliance as a political tactician" was his ability to "shed even his most favored organizational concepts and assumptions when confronted by a new, unexpected reality."

Alinsky then converted this brilliance into direct action. He believed in citizenship through conflict, and he organized and directed this belief in ways that became part of the heritage of the cities that he worked in for decades to come. Thus, in 1961, Alinsky decided to show City Hall in Chicago that Woodlawn was a force to be reckoned with. He combined two elements--votes, which were the coin of the realm in Chicago politics, and fear of the black masses--by taking *forty-six* busloads, 2,500 loud and passionate black citizens, down to City Hall to register to vote. No administrator in Chicago ever forgot that image, and it became the ultimate model, the ultimate fear: two-and-a-half decades later I was the research specialist in housing for the Chicago Urban League. I was supposed to testify on behalf of some route changes in the bus lines going through the black community, and went down to the Chicago Transit Authority to get some background information; important, but hardly the most pressing or fiery issue. I was white, I was speaking in professional language, and I was wearing suit and tie; I also represented a civil rights organization, albeit a tame one by these standards. But Alinsky's legacy remains. At the end of a data-collecting session, a senior management official of the CTA finally asked what he wanted to know all along: "How many busloads of people are you bringing down?"

Combined with this penchant for effective action was Alinsky's rhetoric. Terms like "sarcastic" and "flamboyant" fail to do justice to the simple fact that Alinsky loved to make fun of, to tweak the tail of, to enrage those in power. At Rochester, for example, he said, "The only contribution the Eastman Kodak company has ever made to race relations is the invention of color film." He also suggested that one way to impress the city's elite with the power of the black community was to buy a block of tickets to a performance of the Rochester Symphony, a prominent social event. Prior to the night's outing, treat a hand-picked group of supporters to a big meal of beans, then let them unleash their flatulence throughout the performance.

Horwitt also does not shy away from most criticisms of Alinsky. He openly addresses a crucial element of the Alinsky style--that its founder never actually challenged the capitalist system. Alinsky wanted to make capitalism work better, to spread its benefits to a larger group. He would not, however, countenance any discussion of whether or not the basic structure itself was unfair, unjust, or should be replaced. This attitude, in turn, alienated him from the New Left, and remains the single greatest philosophical shortcoming of Alinsky's work.

Similarly, Horwitt takes on Alinsky's blatant sexism. Organizing for him was man's work, in a manly setting; he reveled in taking big shots to lavish lunches of steak and bourbon--in his view, a real lunch for he-men (or possibly an attempt to shorten opponents' life-spans). He referred to women as "broad" and refused to accept their abilities as organizers till late in his life.

Notwithstanding this honesty, there are a couple of issues that Horwitt fails to tackle. Most pressing is how to take a network of local organizations and turn them into a national voice for progressive reform that will have substantial impact. This was a vision that Alinsky played with all his life, but never really took on full-bore, and never achieved.

Some final comments: this book represents a superb job of research. Alinsky is one of the most difficult subjects imaginable to write about, because he loved to tell stories about himself. Many of these were false, especially as his years, and his embellishments, increased. It would have been easy, therefore, for Horwitt to dismiss them out of hand, but, unfortunately for the diligent researcher, many (but not all) were true.

Horwitt therefore had to make incredibly painstaking efforts to separate fact from fiction. The book begins with an Alinsky story about how he managed to first ingratiate himself into the Capone mob: a mobster had just died, and his mother was bemoaning the fact that she did not have any pictures to remember her son by. Alinsky took a press photographer to the morgue, snapped a shot that he then had retouched, and presented it publicly to the grieving parent.

At first Horwitt accepted this tale at face value, but then became skeptical. He pursued it through numerous sources, including a poker game with one of Alinsky's associates, who told Horwitt it was a lot of baloney. Horwitt had given it up as another yarn, when he decided to take a final look at the Alinsky papers at the University of Illinois-Chicago. There, on his _final day_ of research for the book, in the files of Alinsky's class work at the University of Chicago Sociology Department, were the previously overlooked research notes, telling the same story. For Horwitt, this symbolized the complexity of his enterprise, and he begins with this telling incident.

Horwitt managed to separate fact from myth by conducting several hundred interviews, as well as by mining all the archival sources. This produced the raw material for a book that is rich in the language of Alinsky's life; where else but in Nicholas Hoffman's reports on the Provisional Organization of the Southwest Community would you find the excerpt that he had recruited a local men's group called the Boneheads: "They are basically composed of guys who went to school and went through the war together and grew up in the neighborhood and still live there....There's another group called the Selohssa Club, or 'assholes' spelled backwards, who, I hear, will be affiliating before long. So with the boneheads and the assholes, I really don't see how we can lose."

Horwitt does a first-rate job in telling the difficult story of Saul Alinsky, and he provides an important guide to anyone concerned about the roots and development of community organizing in the United States.

Reviewed by Robert Slayton, Chapman University, slayton@nexus.chapman.edu